



## The public sphere and PR: deliberative democracy and agonistic pluralism

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## The public sphere and PR: deliberative democracy and agonistic pluralism

Phil Ramsey, Ulster University  
pt.ramsey@ulster.ac.uk

<http://ulster.academia.edu/PhilRamsey> | <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5873-489X>

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### Abstract

It is the contention of this chapter that a critical theory of public relations should involve some reflection on the role that public relations plays within the public sphere. Public relations (PR) has become increasingly influential on activity within the public sphere, and hence in the formation of public opinion. In this chapter we shall seek to introduce the public sphere as a critical category – that is, both sociological and theoretical in its scope – and to understand the role of PR, especially within the domain of news media in North American and European democracies. The chapter will focus on the normative dimension of the account of the public sphere forwarded by the German social theorist Jürgen Habermas, which shapes critical theory understandings of the role of PR in the public sphere. The impact of PR on the public sphere will be discussed through the increased influence of PR in journalism, coming at the expense of original and independent reporting. Further to this the competing theories of deliberative democracy and agonistic pluralism will be surveyed, and we will see that the basis upon which we think critically about PR greatly differs depending upon which position we take up. Central here is the question of whether or not consensus is possible within the public sphere, or if contestation is rather inevitable.

## **The public sphere and PR: deliberative democracy and agonistic pluralism**

It is the contention of this chapter that a critical theory of public relations should involve some reflection on the role that public relations plays within the public sphere. Public relations (PR) has become increasingly influential on activity within the public sphere, and hence in the formation of public opinion. In this chapter we shall seek to introduce the public sphere as a critical category – that is, both sociological and theoretical in its scope – and to understand the role of PR, especially within the domain of news media in North American and European democracies. The chapter will focus on the normative dimension of the account of the public sphere forwarded by the German social theorist Jürgen Habermas, which shapes critical theory understandings of the role of PR in the public sphere. The impact of PR on the public sphere will be discussed through the increased influence of PR in journalism, coming at the expense of original and independent reporting. Further to this the competing theories of deliberative democracy and agonistic pluralism will be surveyed, and we will see that the basis upon which we think critically about PR greatly differs depending upon which position we take up. Central here is the question of whether or not consensus is possible within the public sphere, or if contestation is rather inevitable.

### **The theory of the public sphere**

The theory of the public sphere is one of the best-known and most frequently adopted theories for understanding contemporary political and social life within critical media and communication studies, and has been influential on critical accounts of PR. Habermas forwarded his early arguments on the subject in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989) (*STPS*), where he charts the rise of a bourgeois public sphere in eighteenth

century Europe. The central thrust of the Habermasian thesis is that following feudalism as a dominant system, a public sphere emerged as a site of debate and criticism which subjected the state to a new form of scrutiny. By way of defining the public sphere, Habermas's much quoted description provides the most useful introduction: "By 'public sphere' we mean first of all a domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed. Access to the public sphere is open in principle to all citizens" (1997, p. 105). In essence, the (political) public sphere is that "space" in society where citizens discuss a range of political issues, and formulate opinions based on the information that circulates in the public sphere, through rational-critical discussion.

The historical dimension of Habermas's account has long been criticized, particularly on the issue of inclusion, or lack thereof (Curran, 1991, p. 42; Thompson, 1990, p. 112; 1995, p. 73). Perhaps one of the best known critiques comes from Nancy Fraser (1995, p. 289), who argued that the bourgeois public sphere was open only to property-owning, middle class males, with women historically excluded. It is important to note that writing much later in response to his critics Habermas (1992, p. 428) accepted failings in his original *STPS* account, arguing for example that women were indeed excluded from the bourgeois public sphere. Despite criticisms of Habermas's work, it is striking how the normative dimension of his theory, rather than the sociological and historical basis, has endured for many decades. Garnham (1986, p. 43) argued that the principles contained in the *STPS* public sphere model enable it as "ideal type", and that despite numerous problems these "do not undermine the book's continuing claim to our attention as a fruitful starting point for work on urgent contemporary issues in the study of the mass media and democratic politics" (Garnham, 1992, p. 359).

## **Applying public sphere theory to public relations**

Habermas argues in *STPS* that PR in the West came to “dominate the public sphere” from the 1950s onwards, and that PR techniques “have become a key phenomenon for the diagnosis of” the public sphere (1989, p. 193). Indeed, Graham (2012) has noted that “The very concept of ‘public relations’ is one that Habermas looks on with suspicion” (p. 34), and it is to this strand of thought that we turn to now. Habermas is suggesting that in our analysis of the public sphere, and the way in which public opinion is generated, the public sphere researcher must turn their attention to PR strategies and practices to further aid their understanding of how public spheres function. Understanding their functioning may encompass reflection on how Habermas “identified public relations as supporting the dominance of elites and reinforcing structural inequalities” (L’Etang, 2009, p. 6). To set the context for understanding why such an analysis of PR is important to Habermas, it is necessary to see how the role of PR can be viewed as part of Habermas’s “refeudalization of the public sphere” thesis (in *STPS*). By this, Habermas referred to a return to a type of society that bears more resemblance to the feudal period than it does to the bourgeois public sphere, whereby the public sphere was systematically dismantled due to the greater commercialization of the media, the growing influence of the state and the dissipation of public discourse. If we take each of these three areas, we can expand our critique of PR as viewed through this lens.

First, much PR activity has as its focus the news media, in order to impact the news agenda (Davis, 2007). As we shall see below, changing market conditions in the news media environment have led to a greater reliance on PR materials. Second, state agencies and government departments systematically employ the principles of PR in their political communication (McNair, 2004; Somerville & Ramsey, 2012), and it is thus important to

subject this process to assessment. Third, public discourse is undermined by much PR activity which seeks to turn attention to “private” issues (Habermas, 1989), undermining the public interest. In particular, this can be seen in the way Habermas interrogates the role that the state has played in relation to publicity in the refeudalized public sphere, which he argues mirrors the way business operates: “Because private enterprises evoke in their customers the idea that in their consumption decisions they act in their capacity as citizens, the state has to ‘address’ its citizens like consumers. As a result, public authority too competes for publicity” (Habermas, 1989, p. 195). Here Habermas is arguing that the influence of PR has changed the grounds for communication, because of PR’s appeal to the public interest. This argument rests on the distinction that Habermas (1989) makes between PR and advertising, arguing that PR is a technique which makes a claim to political veracity and attempts to manage public opinion among citizens, while advertising is a technique that attempts to influence the public in their role as consumers:

“Opinion management” is distinguished from advertising by the fact that it expressly lays claim to the public sphere as one that plays a role in the political realm. Private advertisements are always directed to other private people insofar as they are consumers; the addressee of public relations is “public opinion,” or the private citizens as the public and not directly as consumers.

(p. 193)

While both private sector organizations and governments use PR and advertising today in their communications operations, Habermas is criticizing the manner in which PR purports to be dealing with matters of public importance. However, he argues that the PR practitioner “hides his business intentions in the role of someone interested in public welfare” (Habermas, 1989, p. 193), when it is private gain that is really at stake. With true intentions being hidden, PR works to bestow “on its object the authority of an object of public interest” (Habermas,

1989, p. 194), to give the impression that the public are forming public opinion on the object in the same way as they do for matters of public importance. Given that the public sphere should be the site for the generation of public opinion that follows from rational-critical debate, many techniques practiced as part of PR are therefore necessarily seen by Habermas in critical terms. In this sense, the public sphere has been colonized by private business interests, with PR professionals working on behalf of those who wish to manage public opinion in line with their wider business, economic and strategic interests, so that the subject of their PR becomes something that appears as being in the public, rather than just the private interest. This occurs in a manner that “goes further” than advertising (Boeder, 2005), with the aim of PR being to engender “quasi-political credit, a respect of the kind one displays toward public authority” (Habermas, 1989, p. 194).

In the Habermasian account of the public sphere, debate which is “rational-critical” in its nature is prioritized. Habermas argued that in the historical model of the public sphere, interlocutors would gain prominence of opinion through the strength of their arguments. The public sphere in this sense is the space where opinions may be aired freely, without ridicule or the fear of violence; here rational-critical debate in the public sphere is protected by a “set of basic rights [...] (freedom of opinion and speech, freedom of press, freedom of assembly and association, etc.) and the political function of private people in this public sphere (right of petition, equality of vote, etc.)” (Habermas, 1989, p. 83). In this conceptualization public opinion is borne out of deliberation – on public matters – and is contingent on freely available information on the affairs of state and of civil society.

Linking Habermas’s understanding of rational-critical debate directly to PR, Miller and Dinan (2009) suggest “There is no place in this idealised model for strategic communication and the presentation of private interests as generalizable public interests. Therefore, much of the practice of PR has no place in a rational, deliberative democracy” (p.

254). In this regard, scholars have attempted to build on the work of Habermas in relation to a critical theory of PR. Among them, McNair (2004) notes that in the UK there is a “critical orthodoxy [that] dominates discussion of political public relations” (p. 325), influenced by “Marxian and normative liberal theory”, where Habermasian public sphere theory is especially influential. In this tradition, “The manufactured messages of the public relations [...] professional are seen to subvert the free flow of information in the public sphere, thwarting the citizen’s exercise of rational choice” (McNair, 2004, p. 325). For example, such a view can be seen in the view of Moloney, Jackson and McQueen (2013), who note critically that “PR always has consequences for democracy because it is a powerful set of persuasive techniques available to all interests in the political economy and civil society” (pp. 262–3). However, critical scholarship is divergent on the issue. For example, the media sociologist Davis (2002) eschews the public sphere approach to studying PR for reasons that include his understanding that “While news sources and PR practitioners may act with rational goals, public relations battles, and the public discourses that result, are far from rational” (p. 14).

Taking a rather different approach to what McNair (2004) calls the “critical orthodoxy” (p. 235) of many scholars, discussed above, some instead have sought to draw on Habermasian theory in support of PR practice. This position is criticized by Miller and Dinan (2009), who in particular focus on those scholars who have attempted to use Habermasian public sphere theory as a way of “perversely [producing] a normative justification for the increasing use of PR in public communication” (p. 257). Miller and Dinan (2009) focus on the work of James Grunig (and his colleague Todd Hunt), who advanced the “excellence in PR” model, based on the “symmetrical communication model” (see Grunig and Hunt, 1984, p. 22). Here it was suggested “that public relations should be guided by values of equality, reciprocity, and the civic ethos” (Pieczka, 2009, p. 2). For Miller and Dinan (p. 2009), this



approach is highly problematic, undermining and misusing Habermasian theory for a very different end:

this theory is in effect an ideal type that has been used as an apologia or legitimation for the (mal)practice of public relations. It conspicuously avoids questions of strategy and interests in the political communication process, beyond the vacuous assertions that communication in itself is a positive virtue and that liberal democracy is based on the right to communicate, petition and make representations to governance actors.

(p. 258)

## **The impact of public relations on journalism**

The extent to which PR has become increasingly influential on the shaping of news and the practice of journalism is an area that has been addressed from the discipline of journalism studies, in particular in relation to the changing political-economic conditions in journalism in North America and Europe. This issue is inexorably tied to the study of the public sphere, as greater influence of PR on journalism would invariably bring a change in the conditions of the public sphere since the information that interlocutors have available to them from the press and news organizations shapes how public opinion is formed (McNair, 2009, p. 238). L'Etang (2009, p. 124) discusses how since the 1950s in the UK, under post-World War Two conditions, journalists who were under greater pressure to fill more space in their newspapers and to deal with their higher production costs, saw the use of PR materials as a way of accommodating these conditions: "Economic changes forced increasing dependence on public relations, which challenged the journalists' role and set in motion a seemingly perpetual tension between the two occupations" (L'Etang, 2009, pp. 124–5). Focusing on

recent developments in this area in the UK, Lewis, Williams and Franklin (2008a) address “four rumours” that have marked the issue. First, that PR professionals and news agencies have gained a greater role “in shaping and informing the news content of national and local news media”, resulting in the notion that “journalists have allegedly become *processors* rather than *generators* of news” (Lewis, Williams & Franklin, 2008a, p. 27). Second, news organizations are expecting more copy from fewer journalists. Third, while journalists increasingly rely on PR materials and agency news copy, a lack of time means that journalists often cannot check the reliability of those materials, thus giving PR a greater influence. Given these three, Lewis et al. (2008a) note (fourth) the impression that the press is “less critical” (p. 28), its independence undermined.

Through a series of influential articles (Lewis et al., 2008a, 2008b) and a report (Lewis, Williams, Franklin, Thomas & Mosdell, 2008), this group of scholars has shown that reportage in some of the UK’s leading quality newspapers has become widely influenced by PR, often using PR materials (and press agency copy) with little or no adaption. In their empirical study, Lewis et al. (2008a) addressed the content of five UK newspapers, analysing more than 2,000 news stories. They found in their sample “almost a fifth (19 per cent) of stories deriving wholly (10 per cent) or mainly (9 per cent) from PR sources” (Lewis et al., 2008a, p. 30). Given that PR was detected in the sample also in other ways, that left only 46 per cent of stories “containing no evidence of PR sources” (Lewis et al., 2008a, p. 30). Lewis et al. (2008b) also found that while newspapers were on-the-whole attempting to “give the impression” (p. 5) that stories had been written by their own journalists, that “Only 1 per cent of stories were *directly attributed* to Press Association (PA) or other agency services”, and that the “data signalled that the *press were far more dependent on copy from these services and other media than conveyed by this initial impression*”. Having outlined a critical account of PR from the perspective of public sphere theory, the chapter will proceed to a discussion

of two divergent areas that relate to contemporary public sphere theory: that of the theory of deliberative democracy and the critical idea of agonistic pluralism.

## **Deliberative democracy**

The theory of deliberative democracy is one closely aligned to that of the public sphere. Central to the theory, which informs the practice of deliberative democracy, is the notion that the public might be able to debate political issues of central importance, and through deliberation be able to reach reasoned and informed agreement. Talisse (2013) outlines the place of deliberative democracy theory in contemporary political theory, noting, “It is safe to say that deliberative democracy is the prevalent framework for contemporary democratic theory; even views that do not claim to be deliberativist emphasize the importance of public discussion and argument for democracy” (p. 611). Dryzek and Dunleavy (2009) chart this “deliberative turn” (p. 215) to around 1990, though as they note deliberative democracy draws its intellectual roots from theories long preceding that year. The development of a deliberative theory of democracy has been of concern to many leading scholars (Rehg & Bohman, 1996; Bohman, 1996; Cohen, 1997; Benhabib, 1996). Latterly, Fishkin’s (1995, 2009) work on deliberative polling (a form of deliberative democracy practice) has been influential in providing empirical evidence for the efficacy of deliberative democracy. Nevertheless, in keeping with much of the rest of the chapter, we turn to the work of Habermas, who has himself drawn on many of these scholars, engaging at turns with their arguments. Dryzek and Dunleavy (2009) note the importance of Habermas’s identification with deliberative democracy, along with that by John Rawls, thus cementing the “success of the deliberative turn” (p. 216). From this period on, Habermas framed his relevant work in

deliberative terms (1994, 2005), discussing the theory with reference to his contemporary observations on the public sphere (Habermas, 2006).

While the theory of deliberative democracy is not homogeneous, there are a number of principles pointed to by various scholars that mark out the overarching features of the theory. The theory of deliberative democracy suggests that legitimacy may be found in political decisions that have proceeded from specific conditions of deliberation. To this end, like much of Habermasian public sphere theory, his account of deliberative democracy theory is normative in its nature (Rehg & Bohman, 1996, p. 80), important in a tradition of theorists who try to propose and justify the conditions under which they think it is realizable. Thus, for Bohman (1997), “Deliberation is democratic, to the extent that it is based on a process of reaching reasoned agreement among free and equal citizens” (p. 321). Moreover, in addition to interlocutors being given “equal consideration” (Talisie, 2013, p. 612) to the reasons that they offer in support of their position in a debate, the “process forces citizens to justify their views about the best outcome by appealing to common interests or by arguing in terms of reasons that ‘all could accept’ in public debate” (Rehg & Bohman, 1996, pp. 80–1). Such a lofty aim means that deliberative democracy has been called “demanding” (Habermas, 2006, p. 413), and one “grounded in an assumption about individuals that stresses their capacity to reflect upon their own preferences, values and judgments in light of their participation in political dialogue with other individuals” (Dryzek & Dunleavy, 2009, p. 216). For Cohen (1997), if deliberative democracy is carried out along the correct lines:

then democratic politics involves *public deliberation focused on the common good*, requires some form of *manifest quality* among citizens and *shapes the identity and interests* of citizens in ways that contribute to the formation of a public conception of common good. (p. 69)

Habermas's connection to deliberative democracy is one much more developed than his early writings on the public sphere. Rather, Habermasian discourse theory was developed across a number of decades, with Rehg (2013, p. 706) arguing that his "mature position first took shape in the 1970s", and "reached its full expression" in *Between Facts and Norms* (Habermas, 1996). At stake for Habermas is the extent to which political decisions might be said to be legitimate, and in so doing build what Rehg (2013, p.712) calls a normative model based upon the Habermasian "discourse theory of democracy and law". For Habermas, "laws are legitimate insofar as they are enacted according to a procedure whose inclusive and discursive properties warrant the presumption that its outcomes are reasonable for all citizens to accept" (Rehg, 2013, p. 712). Drawing on the work of Rehg and Bohman, Habermas (2006) notes:

The deliberative paradigm offers as its main empirical point of reference a democratic process, which is supposed to generate legitimacy through a procedure of opinion and will formation that grants (a) publicity and transparency for the deliberative process, (b) inclusion and equal opportunity for participation, and (c) a justified presumption for reasonable outcomes (mainly in view of the impact of arguments on rational changes in preference). (p. 413)

The relevance of a deliberative theory of politics to our study of PR ought to be clear: as citizens deliberate they rely on sources of information to provide backing for their claims, sources of information that can contribute to a deliberative politics that brings about reasonable decisions. While in various versions of deliberative democracy exercises experts are used to provide interlocutors with the information that they require to use in their deliberations (Fishkin, 2009), in contemporary society it is mainly the information circulating in the public sphere – mostly in the media system – that citizens base their deliberations on.

As we have seen above, in democracies like the UK, PR is very influential on the production of news that citizens are consuming. The argument thus follows that the nature of that news and information may have a bearing on the type of deliberation that takes place. Cottle (2003), for example, suggests that through certain “forms of television journalism, ‘discursive democracy’ can variously come into being and provide resources for wider public deliberation and understanding” (p. 168). If interlocutors are basing their deliberations on news and information that is heavily skewed towards a particular viewpoint, without citizens being aware of the fact, deliberation may be harmed. But what if it is impossible to reach consensus, and to deliberate like rational and reasoned interlocutors, letting the strongest argument win out? Rather than the political sphere being one where consensus need necessarily be reached, what if it is impossible to dispel antagonism between opposing actors? These are the questions at stake for proponents of agonistic pluralism, a competing account of the extent to which consensus through deliberation might be possible, and accordingly relevant for developing a critical theory of PR.

## **Agonistic pluralism**

Crowder (2013) identifies agonistic pluralism as one of the main ways that pluralism in politics is dealt with, of which “The core idea is that human values are irreducibly plural, frequently in conflict, and – crucially – sometimes ‘incommensurable’ with one another” (p. 353). He notes that the agonistic “school” tends to “interpret incommensurability very strongly to mean that choices among plural values must be non-rational” (Crowder, 2013, p. 353). Moreover, the agonistic approach stands in line with theoretical approaches from scholars who “find that the public sphere model places undue emphasis on consensus as a requirement for a healthy democracy” (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 118). A central proponent of

the theory is Chantal Mouffe, who comes in a tradition of postmodern discourse theorists (Rehg, 2013, p. 706). Her account of agonistic pluralism provides a persuasive alternative to deliberative democracy accounts (Mouffe, 1999, 2000, 2005), with her critique of deliberative democracy resting on the basis that the premises that underpin it are wrongly conceived (Mouffe, 1999). Democratic legitimacy cannot come through rationality, since deliberation cannot eliminate antagonism between groups that have competing agendas. On this point, Rehg (2013) notes that Mouffe finds Habermas's "rationalism as profoundly mistaken, based on dangerous illusions about the possibilities of overcoming antagonisms endemic to political life" (p. 715).

The term "agonistic pluralism" is related to "antagonism", but is distinct from it in the view of Mouffe (2000):

Antagonism is struggle between enemies, while *agonism* is struggle between adversaries. We can therefore reformulate our problem by saying that envisaged from the perspective of 'agonistic pluralism' the aim of democratic politics is to transform *antagonism* into *agonism*. (p. 16)

In direct relation to the alternative to deliberative democracy that she posits, Mouffe (1999) argues:

Contrary to the model of "deliberative democracy," the model of "agonistic pluralism" that I am advocating asserts that the prime task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions nor to relegate them to the private sphere in order to render rational consensus possible, but to mobilise those passions towards the promotion of democratic designs. (pp. 755–6)

For proponents of the agonistic approach, the conception of consensus in the deliberative approach is problematic, "as a stabilization of power and that always entails some form of

exclusion” (Mouffe, 1999, p. 756). Mouffe (1999) does not entirely disallow for the possibility of consensus, suggesting that within a plural democratic system a form of “conflictual consensus” (p. 756) may exist; but for Mouffe consensus without exclusion is not possible. Rather, it is the agonistic account for Mouffe (1999) that is the approach which acknowledges the plural nature of democracy, rather than trying to undermine “democratic contestation”: “An ‘agonistic’ democratic approach acknowledges the real nature of its frontiers and recognizes the forms of exclusion that they embody, instead of trying to disguise them under the veil of rationality or morality” (p. 757).

In direct relation to PR, the deliberative approach and the uncertainty over the extent to which consensus might be found, Motion (2005) attempts to reject “idealized participative processes” (p. 506), being as she is at odds with the Habermasian perspective on deliberative democracy. Instead, participative PR is put forward to “explicitly examine discourse transformation and attempts to involve stakeholders in decision-making processes without necessarily conceding power” (Motion, 2005, p. 506). Taking a Foucauldian perspective, Motion discusses the “Catching the Knowledge Wave” conference held in New Zealand in 2001, an event at which the development of the country’s knowledge economy was discussed. She suggests that for PR to be associated with the deliberative approach, to the extent that the deliberative approach involves the “assumption that power relations may be set aside”, is “a risky strategy because although it offers a short-term impression of agreement and consensus, in the long-term interests and conflict cannot be suppressed” (Motion, 2005, p. 508). Here she draws on Mouffe’s agonistic pluralism perspective, to argue, “The public relations challenge, then, is to bring together multiple conflicting interests, take account of power relations, and achieve a consensus, moral compromise, or resolution” (Motion, 2005, p. 508).



## Conclusion

In this chapter we have addressed the public sphere as a normative category, one in which public opinion ought to be formed along rational-critical lines, based on a particular version of deliberation. As we have seen, this theory is further developed by proponents of deliberative democracy, who have suggested how agreement should be formed. In both the deliberative democracy and agonistic pluralism accounts there are implications for the development of a critical theory of PR. The theory of agonistic pluralism provides an increasingly influential critique of deliberative democracy, and a persuasive account regarding the plausibility of consensus being found among parties with different positions on various subjects. It is not enough to say that PR may be considered less problematic when viewed through the agonistic account simply because it is at odds with the deliberative account that is so closely aligned to the public sphere. However, there are clear differences between the two approaches, with deliberative democracy offering more objections to the use of PR than the theory of agonistic pluralism, with relation to the importance of rational-critical debate within the public sphere and the connection between it and the quality of the information that is informing it.

In the case of deliberative democracy, PR can be seen to be impacting negatively on the deliberative democracy process, obscuring the process by which people come to a rational decision, by presenting as something in the public interest when it is really in the private interest. The theoretical basis that it finds in the public sphere places a burden on rational-critical discussion, the kind of discussion that requires balanced and critical reportage to begin from, rather than the starting point of PR which may be utilized to advance the narrow interests of an individual, business or organization. The work of Lewis et al. (2008a, 2008b) shows that PR materials are being incorporated into news media to such an extent that PR is

becoming increasingly influential on the quality of news, negatively impacting on the public sphere. In this regard, the perspective of deliberative democracy provides for us a normative position from which to build capacity in our critical theory of PR, offering a persuasive account of why a healthy media system within a democracy ought to be as free from the influence of PR as possible. Moreover, it allows the theorist to conceive of forms of media reform, to imagine possibilities to improve the conditions under which a more public, and less commercialized media system may take shape (such as through the protection and extension of publicly funded media).

However, in the case of agonistic pluralism it could be argued that the use of PR by those competing groups in society whose interests and aims are ultimately not reconcilable is more *legitimate*, given that a “fully inclusive rational consensus” (Mouffe, 2000) is ultimately impossible. Based on this, the Habermasian critical reflections on PR discussed above hold less value. When you are no longer striving to achieve such consensus between opposing interlocutors or opposing parties, the burden that is placed on communication in the public interest, rather than in the private interest – so important to the former account – is somehow lessened. The argument proceeds that when the possibility of deliberative democracy is given up on, as “demanding” (Habermas, 2006, p. 413) as it might be, that the starting point for a critical theory of PR is somewhat lost.

It could be argued that the agonistic approach allows us to conceive of ways in which PR might be harnessed to further the ends of the agonistic approach, rather than being seen as something intrinsically inimical to the establishment of a critical theory. For example, to return to Mouffe (1999), we saw that she argued “the prime task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions nor to relegate them to the private sphere in order to render rational consensus possible, but to mobilise those passions towards the promotion of democratic designs” (pp. 755–6). Might PR be utilized for more progressive means, in bringing about

such democratic designs, rather than being viewed almost wholly in negative terms by the public sphere and deliberative democracy approaches? In considering this question, many other questions are raised, and a fuller theory of agonistic pluralism in relation to PR would need to be established in order to work through the implications of this. Such a critical theory could fairly point to the ways in which news and journalism have been impacted by PR and the failure of North American and European societies to sustain the forms of media that the correct functioning of a deliberative public sphere relies so heavily upon. Rather than trying to conceive of a better system, it could be argued that effective use of PR is a pragmatic accommodation (maybe even a necessity?) to the actually-existing conditions of society. Proponents of the deliberative democracy and Habermasian public sphere approach might respond by arguing that it is only through sustaining the notion of deliberative politics that we can maintain a normative critique of PR, and instead conceive of a more democratic media system.

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